

Mural Kids!

Silver City Children Create Ceramic Murals Around Town

By ANN PATTON

Thousands of Silver City children and their mentors have created 60 art murals around this southwest New Mexico town of 10,000. Their art celebrates the town's rich history and culture and stunning natural setting. And more murals are in the works by the Mimbres Region Arts Council's Youth Mural Program and others.

More than 3,000 children and volunteers worked together to create a ceramic-mosaic mural depicting the great floods of 1895 through 1903 that nearly killed the town. Creating The Big Ditch mural combines art,



Silver City youngsters and volunteers created this ceramic mosaic mural titled "Water is Life" on the 12th Street Bridge. Photo by Diana Ingalls Lebya.



Jayden Oldfield (left) and Dakota Patton search for Dakota's handprint from among the thousands of children's handprints on a Penny Park mural. Photo by Diana Ingalls Lebya.

environmental education and community-building. The 60-foot-long mural is a mosaic composite of ceramic raindrops, a storm, the town and a flood.

The story is told in running headlines spiraling across the mural, using poetic phrases drawn from newspaper accounts of the day. They explain not only the disaster but also the cause: the hills were denuded by overgrazing and logging, channeling water from the mountains into Main Street, which was built in the waterway.

More than 2,000 students and many volunteers completed the mural, which is on a retaining wall below a building that survived the flood. It is on a high bank of the Big Ditch, the 55-foot-deep gully carved down to bedrock by the floods. What is now the ditch was once Main Street.

"I make the children research the culture and history of each site, and their story grows from that," says Silver City artist Diana Ingalls Lebya. She was the catalyst for the Youth Mural Program that began in 2003, and she serves as its coordinator, working through the nonprofit Mimbres Region Arts Council.

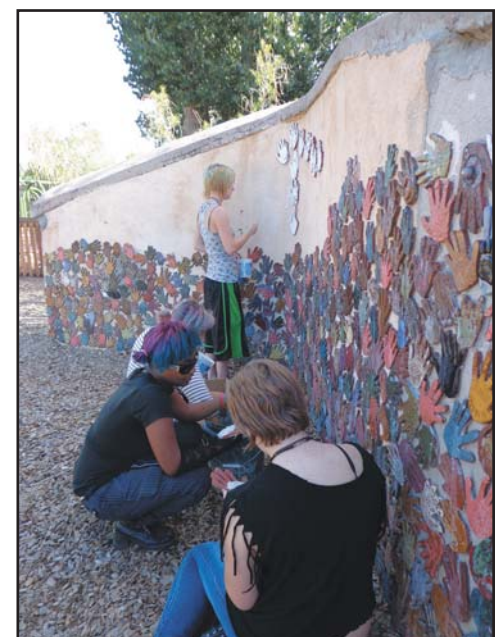
Children, some as young as first grade, drive the mural program, Diana said. They provide research for the murals, develop the story and the vision, translate their findings into visuals, and create murals with help from mentoring artists and interns. Sometimes Diana invites their parents and the whole town to pitch in.

The Youth Mural projects are supported by grants and donors, donated materials and volunteers. "It just works," Diana said. "Somebody offers a wall, somebody kicks in some money, the children begin researching the history and culture of that site, and they develop a vision." Then the magic comes together.

Sometimes local tile companies donate clay and glaze. Cooperation with the schools and art teachers is vital. For several years, thousands of volunteers have mobilized through "Comcast Cares Day" sponsored by the Comcast Foundation.

Another recent mural is named "Water is Life." The ceramic mosaic is mounted on a long, low bridge and depicts the essential river of life flowing through and sustaining life in the mountains, desert and town.

At the local cemetery, children are creating mosaic portraits of town founders and characters such as Billy the Kid's mother. Elsewhere,




Students apply children's clay handprints to a wall at Penny Park. Photo by Diana Ingalls Lebya.

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heroes of World War II and of the 1951 Empire Zinc Company mine strike are celebrated, along with library readers and local farmers. Even the clay itself is historically significant — it was used to 1,000 years ago to create the famed pottery of the Mimbres culture.

Their largest project to date is Penny Park.

In the late 1990s, Silver City children collected pennies and the community came together to create Penny Park, built entirely of wood by volunteers. Not long after, it burned down, from an unknown cause, perhaps a careless firecracker, Diana said. The community rebuilt it — only to have another fire that damaged much of the park.

In the third rebirth of Penny Park, the park is encircled and intertwined with ceramic tile and mosaic walls, murals and displays. They contain literally thousands of ceramic handprints of children, mostly from younger grades, who come together year after year to create more magic in their park.

"We went into the schools with slabs of clay — really, tons of clay — into art rooms, and worked with art teachers," Diana said. "The children traced around their hands, cut out their handprints, then decorated them as they chose." Diana, teens and volunteers dried, glazed, and fired them, and then the children and volunteers put them on the walls.

"We did the first batch on Comcast Cares Day, and invited the whole community to help," she said. "We had thousands of people participating."

Dakota Patton, now 12 and in 7th grade in Tularosa, remembers making hand prints when he was in second grade. "Diana brought big slabs of clay to our art class, had us cut around our hands with a special tool, and put our names on the back of each cutout," he said. "A few days later, Diana put them on the wall at Penny Park. Diana knows everything. We got to watch as she put them up. It was so cool."

A few years later, Dakota got the chance to be part of a second mural project, a nature mural at Jaurequi Park. This time, he was able to research wild animals and draw and paint them on the mural, where and as he chose. Visiting recently, he proudly described his work in detail. "I did that," he said.

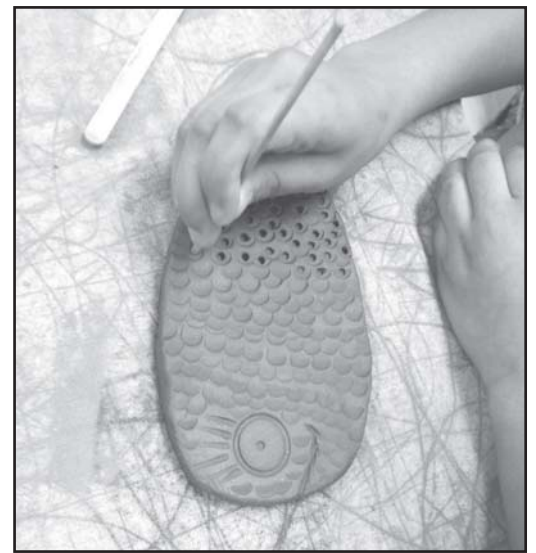
Dakota said being part of a team and seeing the spectacular mural gave

him new confidence. "It inspired me to start doing art, and other things, too. When we drive past the park, I think, 'I could do that!' So if I can do that, maybe I can do other things, too. It has been awesome for me."

Dakota was delighted when he rediscovered his hand print on a recent return visit to Penny Park.

His friend Jayden Oldfield, 8, of Ruidoso, begged his mother to move to Silver City so he could make murals, too. "Penny Park is the best park I ever saw," Jayden said. "The walls and all the hand prints are awesome, and the dragon mural on the wall is so cool."

"We're doing more than just creating art," Diana said. "We are also building pride and self esteem, teaching children to love their heritage and their homes, and creating community. It has been 14 years now, and kids I have worked with now have kids. Some come back into the program as interns and artists. It's a basic need we all have to express ourselves."



A youngster decorates a ceramic raindrop for "The Big Ditch" mural. Photo courtesy Youth Mural Program.

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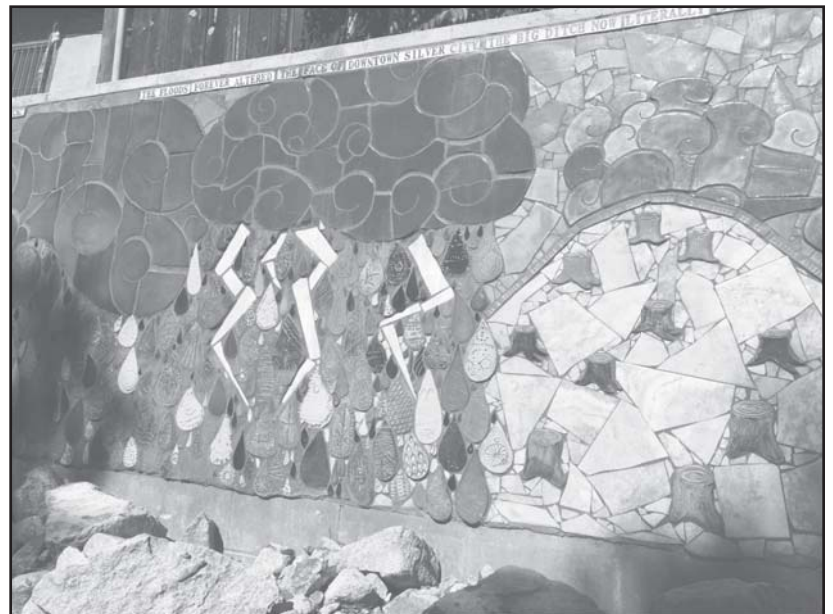
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"The Big Ditch" mural depicts a 1895 rainstorm that led to flooding. Photo by Diana Ingalls Leyba.

The Big Ditch mural depicts the floods of 1895-1903 that ravaged Silver City and carved a 55-foot-deep channel through the town. The mural inscription includes these words, gathered by children from newspaper accounts of the day:

The long-prayed-for rain came and came in torrents.

The somber clouds, which for hours had hung threateningly over the Pinos Altos Range, precipitated their pent-up gloom upon the steep hillside, which gathered the waters into a compact volume, from which place it swept down the narrow gorge with terrific force upon the town of Silver City.

This flood struck the town in an immense wave twelve feet high and three hundred feet in width, carrying with it everything moveable in its path.

The former Main Street had by 1907 acquired a new nickname — the Big Ditch.

The floods forever altered the face of downtown Silver City.

The Big Ditch now literally splits the town.